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SUBJECT: FELTMAN-SHAPIRO MARCH 7 DISCUSSIONS WITH SYRIAN FM
MUALLIM ON COMPREHENSIVE PEACE, GOLAN TRACK

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 b, d.

11. (S/NF) Summary: Acting NEA A/S Feltman and NSC NENA Senior Director Shapiro stressed the strong U.S. commitment to achieving a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians and a comprehensive regional peace between Israel and its other neighbors. The U.S. emphasis was no longer on "process" but rather on concrete agreements, they said. Muallim noted Syria and Israel had made progress in indirect peace talks brokered by Turkey between May-October 2008; the parties had come very close in December 2008 to moving to direct negotiations, but Israel's Gaza incursion led to a suspension. Now Syria was waiting to see whether and how Israel would act once a new government was formed. Feltman said that it would be difficult to imagine the U.S. saying no if Syria and Israel asked for it to help advance a peace agreement. Muallim affirmed the importance of a constructive U.S. role in the region and reported Syria had agreed to support 2009 Arab League Summit language that would keep the Arab Peace Initiative on the table, albeit not forever. End Summary

12. (S/NF) Acting NEA A/S Jeffrey Feltman and NSC Senior Director for the Near East and North Africa Dan Shapiro met for three-and-a-half hours on March 7 with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallim, Vice FM Faisal Miqdad, and Presidential Advisor for Political and Media Affairs Bouthaina Shaaban. Feltman's delegation was accompanied by Charge and Pol/Econ Chief (notetaker.) Feltman and Shapiro's central message was that the U.S. administration was pursuing sustained and principled engagement with Syria and other countries as a matter of policy. The President and Secretary did not view engagement as a reward, but rather as a tool for achieving concrete objectives. This cable reports on the parts of the discussion that dealt with comprehensive peace and Syrian-Israeli issues. It should be read in conjunction with septels on discussions regarding Palestinian issues, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and Embassy Damascus operations.

U.S. Role in Comprehensive Peace Essential

13. (S/NF) In a lengthy review of regional peace efforts since 1990, Muallim stressed U.S. involvement and political will were necessary to achieve an agreement. With intense U.S. involvement, Syrian and Israeli negotiators had completed roughly 75-80 percent of the work before talks broke down in 2000. In the end, the key issue was the June

4, 1967 line of withdrawal, which had been Syria's sine qua non issue on which there could be no concession. Muallim said there had been back channel discussion mediated by Ron Lauder which had brought the parties closer to an agreement. Beginning roughly two years ago, Turkey began mediating between Israel and Syria to draw them closer to resuming talks. To avoid another failure, Bashar decided in May 2008 to participate in indirect talks with Israel under Turkish auspices in order to test whether Israel was serious about reaching a deal.

Review of Indirect Israeli-Syrian Talks

14. (S/NF) Muallim said Syria and Israel had made significant progress in the 2008 indirect peace talks, but the U.S. government had shown little real interest and seemed to oppose the indirect negotiations. Muallim said the U.S. was mistaken not to see value in the talks because their mere existence had helped to calm the region and had raised significant doubts about Syria's commitment to its relations with Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas. The Syrian regime remained aware that four rounds of indirect talks would in the end not produce tangible results without American involvement. Syria nonetheless reacted positively to Turkish overtures to consider a fifth round aimed at moving to direct talks. Muallim reported the parties had come very close in December 2008 ("a few words away") to moving to direct negotiations, but Israeli PM Olmert had asked on December 24 for a few days to consult with his coalition partners. Israel,s Gaza

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incursion on December 27 led to a suspension of the talks and a sense in Turkey and Syria that the Israeli government had used the promise of another round as a distraction from its real military aims. Now Syria was waiting to see whether and how Israel would act once a new government was formed.

15. (S/NF) The important factor for Syria was reaching agreement of any direct talks on a "description" of the June 4 line of withdrawal. Syria, he said, had deposited with the Turks a document with six geographical reference points, to which the Israelis had never formally responded. Israel, for its part, had deposited a draft paper on security aims and principles with the Turks, to which the Syrians had responded, but the response had not been shared with Israel because of Israel's pending response to Syria's paper. Agreement on a "description" of the June 4 line would be necessary before direct negotiations on a "definition" of the border could begin, Muallim stipulated.

----- Arab Peace Initiative: Still Alive, Not Forever -----

16. (S/NF) Muallim said he had recently chaired a meeting of Arab League ministers in Cairo and had agreed to support keeping the Arab Peace Initiative on the table, "but not forever." He had worked closely with the Saudis to ensure this position would be adopted by the March 2009 Arab League Summit in Doha. Muallim urged the U.S. to convince the new Israeli government to take advantage of this opportunity, adding that Syrian officials were confident they could deal with whomever led the new Israeli government.

----- Syrian-Israel Agreement Not "Real" Peace -----

17. (S/NF) Syria, continued Muallim, was ready to sign a peace deal with Israel without a parallel agreement on the Palestinian track. But as President Asad had conveyed to several recent U.S. Congressional delegations (CODELS), the Syrian government (SARG) believed a bilateral Syrian-Israeli treaty would not constitute real peace without a

comprehensive framework that included a two-state solution. Welcoming the U.S. commitment to achieving comprehensive peace (and putting emphasis on tangible results instead of process), Muallim said Syria viewed U.S. involvement as important.

18. (S/NF) Feltman welcomed Muallim's positive message and stressed the U.S. commitment to a two-state solution and comprehensive peace. He said the U.S. administration believed the peace process had continued too long without concrete results. The President had appointed Special Envoy Mitchell on his second day in office and the Secretary had announced a comprehensive Middle East peace as a high priority in her first meeting with senior State Department staff. The Secretary, moreover, had put a new emphasis on achieving peace, vice a "peace process." It had taken some adjustment within the U.S. bureaucracy, but now there was a new emphasis on achieving concrete peace. Against this backdrop, Feltman said, it would be difficult to imagine the U.S. saying no if Syria and Israel asked for it to help advance these objectives. Muallim welcomed this message and said a U.S. role would be essential for achieving a comprehensive peace in the region.

19. (SBU) Acting NEA A/S Feltman and NSC NENA Senior Director Shapiro cleared this cable.

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